

Code-Switching: A Problem to Solve or Normal Behavior?

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During a student dictation of a text using the language experience approach in a first grade classroom, María dictates, “Voy a ir a una party con mi broder”. Her teacher, Marco, shares this experience in a graduate level bilingual endorsement class and asks for help. He wonders if María simply doesn’t have a fully developed language. “How can I teach her when she doesn’t speak either of the two languages well?”

María is code-switching, or mixing her two languages, a very common behavior in a bilingual child. Children who feel confident with one language or the other will choose that language when speaking to others (Pérez-Bazan, 2002). María is a simultaneous bilingual child. In other words, she has been exposed to two languages from birth and so she uses both of her languages in expressing herself. The challenge for educators is to understand María’s code-switching as normal and expected, and to not fall into the trap of comparing María to monolingual learners.

There are three types of code-switching, according to Poplack (1980). The first is tag switching, as in “She missed the bus again, verdad?” Tag switching is when the speaker inserts a tag in one language into an utterance that is entirely in another language. Inter-sentential switching involves a switch at a clause or sentence boundary where each is in a different language. For example, “!No me gustó, come here and do it again, pero esta vez lo haces bien!” And finally, intra-sentential code-switching is when the switch happens within a clause or sentence boundary, as in, “Esos yellow shoes no estaban on sale”. (Goodman, 2007)

Though code-switching has been shown to be common, natural, and a true sign of bilinguals since the 1970’s (Grosjean, 1982), we still hear the comments expressed in the vignette above that view code-switching as a problem. Instead of viewing the mixing of two languages as a sophisticated communicative mechanism that is governed by rules and used as a communicative strategy by bilinguals, many of our students are viewed as not knowing how to speak either of their languages well. In large part, this deficit view comes from comparing bilinguals to monolinguals without understanding what is normal for a bilingual learner. Kathy Escamilla and other researchers are encouraging us to change this deficit paradigm for a positive one that views bilinguals as different from

monolinguals, and as students who are best served in a bilingual context where both of their languages can be used for learning.

Simultaneous bilinguals like María are now the majority of our English Language Learners, making up about 65% of all our ELLs at the national level (Swanson, 2009). What kind of linguistic creativity can we expect of our two-language learners? The following categories come from Kim Potowski's (2005) research on heritage language speakers.

Expression	Example	Explanation
Code-switching	<p>"Tengo el eight."</p> <p>"Vamos a ir camping"</p>	One explanation is that students may know the name of an object or activity only in English, or only in Spanish, and so they insert the words they know from each language.
Linguistic Borrowing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wáchale • Socketines • Troca 	Students create their own nouns and verbs blending structures and words in both languages.
Semantic Extensions	"Vamos a comprar las groserías." (Let's go buy the groceries – false cognate).	Students use a word they believe to be a cognate when in fact, it is not.
Copying	Voy a mi tío Marco's casa.	Used by both simultaneous and sequential bilinguals, students use the syntax of one language but with the words of the other.

Dual language classrooms will be made up of bilingual learners whose speech is similar to the examples above, and who may have some knowledge in one language, and other knowledge in the second language. Sequential learners will also be included in the dual language classroom. Unlike simultaneous learners who have been exposed to both languages before age 3, sequential learners are exposed to a second language after age 3 and before age 7, having first developed one language. Sequential bilingual learners also use both their languages for learning, and while they are acquiring their second language

they often transfer known elements of the first language to the second (Goodman, 2007). Transference of normal errors are produced when L1 (first language) rules are applied to L2 (second language) rules (Kessler, 1982) as in “I have 5 years” (Yo tengo 5 años). Because it is so clear that the sequential student is applying her knowledge from one language in learning the second, transference issues seem to be more accepted and understood in general in our field. In dual language classrooms in the U.S., it is more likely that our majority language speakers (English dominant students) will use English rules as they learn Spanish.

Our dual language students are very creative in using their two languages for learning, whether they are simultaneous or sequential bilinguals. Once we learn all that they can do with language, and understand that their mixing of language is a sign of linguistic creativity, normal among bilinguals, we can then use their oral language as the foundation for new learning.

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